



NEWS RELEASE

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INS Achieves Naturalization Goal for FY 1999 ***Agency Completes 1.2 Million Applications***

WASHINGTON – INS Commissioner Doris Meissner and Attorney General Janet Reno today announced that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) completed more than 1.2 million naturalization applications during FY 1999—a 105 percent increase from FY 1998 (610,547). The agency also fulfilled its commitment to cut in half the average length of time it takes to process a naturalization application to 12 months—down from 28 months at the beginning of the fiscal year. This means that applicants who file in October 1999 can expect to wait an average of 12 months for their cases to be adjudicated.

“Citizenship is the embodiment of America's values of liberty, democracy and equal opportunity,” said Attorney General Reno. “Improving our citizenship program to be efficient and effective will help our country meet the challenges of the 21st century.”

“Welcoming new citizens is one of the most important things we do as a nation. I am grateful to the Attorney General for her support and to Congress for the \$176 million in additional funding provided to boost naturalization efforts,” said Commissioner Meissner. “I am very proud of the remarkable headway INS has made with the naturalization program. This is a true testament to the extraordinary performance of INS employees.”

In the last seven years, from 1993 to 1999, 6.4 million immigrants applied for citizenship, more than the total in the previous 37 years combined. Faced with this unprecedented workload, INS undertook a two-year initiative to clear the naturalization backlog and restore timely processing of citizenship applications.

At the beginning of FY 1999, INS had a pending caseload of more than 1.8 million applications. By the end of September, the agency had received 720,468 new applications. INS implemented an aggressive plan to solve production problems and succeeded in reducing the backlog to less than 1.4 million. The agency was able to welcome 872,485 new citizens.

Five major cities, which handle approximately 65 percent of the workload nationwide, achieved impressive increases in the number of applications completed over the year before: Los Angeles – 175 percent, New York – 191 percent, Miami – 175 percent, Chicago – 107 percent, and San Francisco – 98 percent.

(more)

The agency is now on track to meet its two-year goal of reducing the average time it takes to process an application to only six months by the end of FY 2000 (based on a projected 700,000 new applications). INS plans to meet this goal by completing 1.3 million naturalization applications in FY 2000. It is also positioned to take on other immigration benefit caseloads more effectively, such as the adjustment of status backlog and the Green Card (Form I-551) renewal program that began this fall.

“The dramatic reduction in the backlog of naturalization cases represents substantial improvements in customer service and enables us to expand our progress to other immigration services,” Meissner said.

To increase production for the naturalization program, the agency implemented a number of initiatives in FY 1999, which included: eliminating processing bottlenecks, improving the performance of new automated systems and their interfaces with other systems, allocating additional funding for application processing needs (i.e., contract support, overtime), and hiring 200 additional adjudicators.

In FY 2000, as the agency continues to make progress in handling the naturalization backlog, these initiatives will be extended to the adjustment-of-status backlog and to the Green Card (Form I-551) renewal program.

Adjustment of Status

Adjustment of status refers to the procedure that allows certain aliens already in the United States—those eligible to receive an immigrant visa and for whom one is immediately available—to apply for immigrant status with INS.

The agency’s adjustment-of-status application workload nearly doubled between 1994 and 1995 when Section 245(i) of the Immigration and Nationality Act was implemented. This provision, which expired in January 1998, allowed illegal aliens residing in the United States who were otherwise eligible for immigrant status to pay a penalty fee and apply with INS for adjustment of status in the United States, instead of acquiring a visa abroad from the Department of State. The pending workload of adjustment-of-status applications increased almost eight times from FY 1994 to FY 1999 (from 121,000 to 951,348).

By extending naturalization production initiatives to this workload, INS is embarking on a multi-year effort to eliminate the adjustment-of-status backlog. INS plans to complete 500,000 adjustment of status applications in FY 2000—a 67 percent increase from the number of applications completed in FY 1999 (299,887). This will reduce the national average processing time by nine months (from 33 months to 24 months).

Green Card Renewal

In the fall of 1989, INS began issuing Green Cards with 10-year expiration dates indicated on the front of the card. INS estimates that up to 660,000 lawful permanent residents will need to renew their Green Cards during the next 12 months. INS has implemented new procedures to handle this volume of work and improve customer service. The agency will continue to enhance these procedures in coming months to improve the renewal process and reduce the wait time for a new card.

In FY 2000, INS plans to achieve a 90-day processing time on applications for Green Card renewals—a significant drop from the current 12-month average time.

FY 1998-99 Naturalization Production Summary

| DISTRICT | FY 1999 Receipts | FY 1998 Completions | FY 1999 Completions |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Anchorage | 1,024 | 1,258 | 874 |
| Atlanta | 20,274 | 17,868 | 23,092 |
| Baltimore | 11,772 | 16,032 | 12,923 |
| Boston | 26,184 | 27,616 | 47,345 |
| Buffalo | 4346 | 6,158 | 5331 |
| Chicago | 48,134 | 30,234 | 62,716 |
| Cleveland | 5,514 | 7,301 | 6,208 |
| Dallas | 18,704 | 10,489 | 38,547 |
| Denver | 9,298 | 6,770 | 17,828 |
| Detroit | 11,700 | 10,028 | 18,659 |
| El Paso | 5,646 | 9,546 | 20,934 |
| Harlingen | 3,756 | 5,793 | 11,768 |
| Hawaii | 5,259 | 8,105 | 5,854 |
| Helena | 1,228 | 1,211 | 2,010 |
| Houston | 22,958 | 10,760 | 33,546 |
| Kansas | 5,446 | 5,402 | 7,841 |
| Los Angeles | 139,177 | 109,461 | 301,318 |
| Miami | 45,715 | 51,694 | 142,276 |
| New Orleans | 8,579 | 8,862 | 12,870 |
| New York City | 94,184 | 54,028 | 156,957 |
| Newark | 55,429 | 32,796 | 44,574 |
| Omaha | 3,534 | 3,096 | 3,646 |
| Philadelphia | 13,592 | 14,093 | 19,281 |
| Phoenix | 24,651 | 13,174 | 26,475 |
| Portland, Maine | 856 | 1,300 | 1,021 |
| Portland, Oregon | 6,360 | 6,565 | 8,900 |
| San Antonio | 10,671 | 12,841 | 18,148 |
| San Diego | 17,362 | 23,544 | 27,765 |
| San Francisco | 88,299 | 60,107 | 118,788 |
| San Juan | 2,900 | 5,980 | 7,055 |
| Seattle | 13,241 | 18,933 | 16,852 |
| St. Paul | 6,736 | 6,694 | 8,895 |
| Washington | 13,858 | 12,808 | 20,897 |
| Servicewide | 720,468 | 610,547 | 1,252,687 |

